

Issues of Merit

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Has Downsizing Reduced Diversity? Not Yet.

There is no shortage of warnings that current Governmentwide downsizing strategies risk adversely affecting the diversity of the Federal workforce. These warnings are not without foundation, and the adverse effects of downsizing on women and minority workers have been well-documented in the downsizing of a number of organizations. However, an examination of Governmentwide downsizing during a three-year period between September 1992 and September 1995 shows that the

representation of full-time, permanent minority employees increased from 27 percent to 29 percent. During the same period, representation of women in the full-time, permanent workforce increased from 42 to 43 percent. How can such findings of improved diversity be reconciled with the expected decrease in diversity during downsizing?

Figure 1. Number of Full-Time Permanent Minority and Nonminority Federal Employees: Sept 92 to Sept 95.

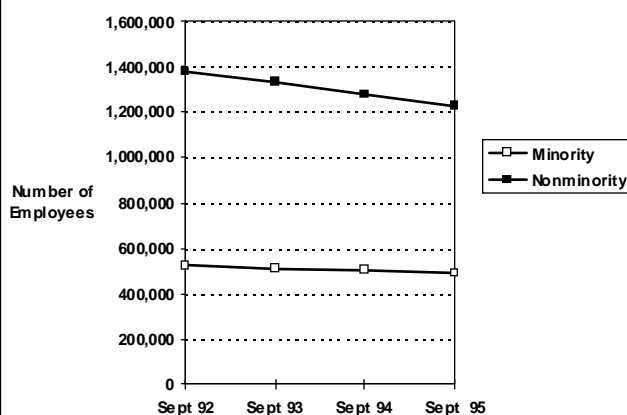


Figure 1 contains part of the answer. First, figure 1 shows that while the overall number of minority employees has decreased somewhat since September of 1992, this decrease is considerably less than that for nonminority employees (6 percent vs. 11 percent). Similarly, the decrease in

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OPE Focus on the Facts

Belief: Most people first enter Federal professional and administrative jobs from civil service registers maintained by the Office of Personnel Management.

Fact: In our study, "Entering Professional Positions in the Federal Government," we found that fewer than one in five people (19%) first entering Federal professional and administrative jobs were from this source. The largest single source was direct hiring without the use of registers (29%).

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the number of women was 8 percent versus an 11 percent decrease for men.

While these findings show that minority and women employees are leaving the Government at rates lower than those for nonminorities and men, a fuller answer to our question requires a closer look at how this downsizing was accomplished. For example, in FY94 the Government lost about 60,000 full-time permanent employees. However, this was not a simple separation of 60,000 employees. Rather, it primarily represents the net result of over 120,000 separations balanced against 40,000 hires from outside Government and a number of conversions of employees from other types of appointments to full-time permanent appointments. Furthermore, figure 2 shows that the separations are from several major sources, and that in FY94, 84 percent of them came

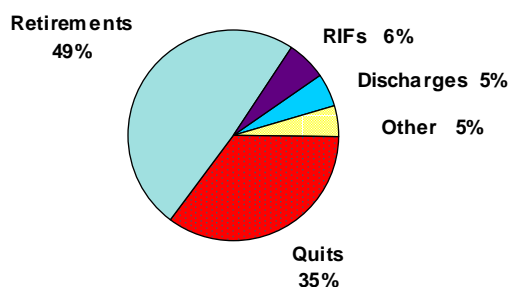
from voluntary retirements or resignations. No doubt many of these separations were stimulated by the buyouts that were made available to Federal employees during this time period. Just 6 percent of all the full-time, permanent separations in FY94 were based on the use of reduction-in-force (RIF) procedures.

These comparisons are important because they make it clear that Governmentwide downsizing is not synonymous with RIF and that RIF procedures have, to date, played a relatively minor role (statistically) in reducing the size of the Government's workforce. Because current RIF procedures are based in large part on years of service, they can adversely affect minority and women employees who, as groups, often are relatively recent entrants to the Federal workforce. Usually, the extent to which a downsizing

strategy requires that RIF procedures be invoked will directly determine the extent to which women and minorities will be adversely affected.

Thus, concerns about losing diversity will most likely apply in organizations where RIFs, of necessity, play a major role in downsizing. On the national level, however, it's unlikely that RIFs will become a sufficiently large component of the downsizing strategy to threaten the Government's diversity goal. Nevertheless, it is important to continue to monitor the Government's overall strategy for reducing the size of the workforce and to ensure that the various ways in which people enter and leave the Government are handled fairly, and that they do not endanger the Government's efforts to achieve a workforce representing all segments of our society.

Figure 2. Different Ways in Which Full-time Permanent Employees Left Government in FY94



Career Expectations May Need Adjustment

Federal employees who don't adjust their career expectations may become increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs in the near future since there are fewer promotion opportunities in the Government than there were just a few years ago.

The decrease in opportunities for advancement can be seen by looking at current and historical promotion rates. Most professional and administrative employees who begin their careers as GS 5s or GS 7s are promoted relatively quickly to the GS 7 and GS 9 levels. From then on, however, promotions slow down considerably. And the pace of promotions has, in recent years, become even slower. For example, in the 1993-94 period, promotion rates for the more highly graded positions were so low that less than 10 percent of GS 12s, 13s, and 14s were promoted, and only 1 percent of GS 15s received promotions.

These rates are 30 percent lower than they were only two years earlier, and probably reflect agency efforts to streamline and downsize Government operations. Further, since downsizing efforts are likely to continue into the foreseeable future and agencies are likely to specifically target middle management positions, these percentages may go even lower.

It is important for employees to factor these realities into their career plans and their views of working for the Government. We know from surveys conducted by MSPB that employees can get very dissatisfied when they believe they have not been fully considered, or that they have been un-

fairly passed over, for a competitive promotion. Even where there is no question about the open nature of the competition, it still often is contrary to human nature for some to believe that the person selected was as well qualified as they were for a position. To the extent that the trend towards lower promotion rates continues, employees who have unrealistic expectations for advancement may be even more prone to blame co-workers and the system for their lack of success in attaining career objectives.

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To keep employees motivated and satisfied with their jobs in times of reduced opportunity, supervisors may need to both educate their subordinates to the realities of their promotion opportunities and at the same time attempt to enrich the work lives of the people who report to them. This could include greater use of rotational and developmental assignments which can expose employees to new career possibilities. Training employees on new job skills can also improve

morale by providing employees with new avenues for advancement.

Talking About Sex in the Workplace

A majority of Federal workers now believe that in most circumstances it is not appropriate to tell sexual jokes or to talk about sexual topics while on the job. So if there's any doubt about how a listener will react to comments of a sexual nature, a person would be well-advised to refrain from making those comments.

In our most recent sexual harassment survey, we asked employees their opinion of the following sentence: "Sexual joking or conversations in which people talk about sexual issues are almost always inappropriate in the workplace." More than half the respondents (56 percent) agreed with the statement. Only one-fifth did not. Some 23 percent neither agreed nor disagreed with the sentiments contained in the sentence.

This response helps to illuminate a general trend observed in the answers to MSPB's sexual harassment survey questions. More and more employees are seeing activities of a sexual nature as harassing behavior. In 1980, 1987, and 1994 we asked Federal employees whether they

considered certain types of unwanted behavior to be sexual harassment. The percentage of employees who saw those activities as harassment increased each time the survey was administered.

For example, in 1980, more than three-quarters (77 percent) of female employees in Government considered it to be harassment for a supervisor to pressure a subordinate employee for a date. In 1994, 91 percent of them saw that behavior as harassment. In the same vein, nearly half (47 percent) of Federally employed men considered suggestive looks or gestures from coworkers to be harassing behavior in 1980, while by 1994, more than three-quarters (76 percent) of them saw that behavior as harassment.

The survey results, which show the workforce's increasing sensitivity to harassment concerns over time, suggest that most employees think that sexual bantering in the workplace should be avoided.

Communicating with Problem Employees

Supervisors who believe their employees understand the actions they are taking with regard to an employee's misconduct or poor performance should take heed. MSPB recently surveyed several

hundred Federal supervisors and their employees who had been subjected to disciplinary action and found quite a mismatch between what supervisors thought they communicated about the actions and what employees actually understood.

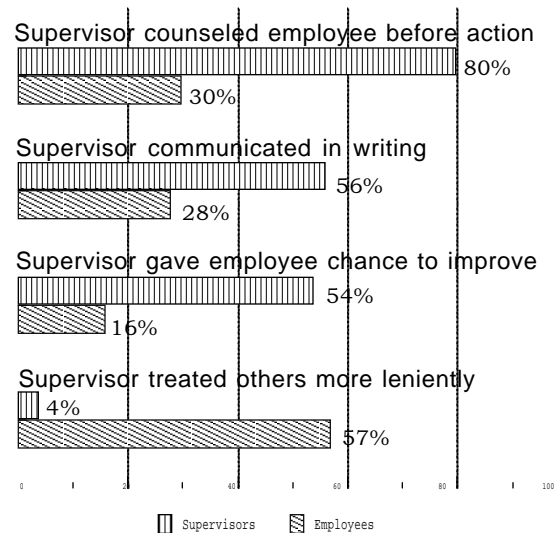
In our survey, both the supervisor and the disciplined employee were asked about events that occurred before the discipline—such as a reprimand or a suspension—was imposed. The survey asked if there had been counseling or a written warning or if the employee had been given an opportunity to improve before the disciplinary action was taken. The employees' and the supervisors' views differed substantially. While 80 percent of supervisors indicated they had counseled the employee prior to taking formal action, only 30 percent of their own employees

said they had been counseled by their supervisors. Similarly, 56 percent of supervisors, but only 28 percent of employees indicated that the supervisor had communicated with them in writing before initiating the formal action.

While more than half of supervisors we surveyed

(54 percent) reported that they had given the employee an opportunity to improve his or her conduct or performance, fewer than one-fifth (16 percent) of employees said they had been given a chance to improve. In addition, we asked if other employees of the same supervisor had been treated comparably for similar behavior. More than half of employees (57 percent) reported that the supervisor who initiated the action against them had treated another similarly situated employee more leniently. Only 4 percent of supervisors said

What Are Supervisors' and Employees' Perceptions About Discipline?



they were more lenient with another employee who committed a comparable offense or performed at the same level as the employee who was disciplined.

These responses indicate that there is a substantial mismatch between the perceptions of employees and their supervisors with

regard to the events leading up to formal disciplinary action. Supervisors believe they are clearly communicating their expectations to their subordinates, but oftentimes their employees are not understanding them clearly. As a result, some employees who fail to meet supervisors' expectations—whether in terms of performance or conduct—may fail because they do not interpret their bosses' words or actions as an admonition. In addition, supervisors who believe that they are treating all of their staff members uniformly should be aware that many disciplined employees will view their treatment as inconsistent with the supervisor's treatment of their coworkers. These findings underline the need for more effective communication between supervisors and employees, particularly in situations where disciplinary action may be required.

States Can Teach Us About Customer Service

As a result of the Government Performance and Results Act, agencies are beginning to set customer service standards. There are lessons that Federal human resources managers can learn, in that regard, from the efforts of some State and

local governments. We have been particularly impressed with the award-winning recruitment and placement reforms adopted by the State of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin has made information on all State openings more accessible by initiating a Job On-Line Bulletin Service (JOBS). This service provides civil service job information to anyone with access to a personal computer and modem. By placing JOBS on the Internet, Wisconsin's job vacancies can be publicized widely. Vacancies are also announced in the Current Employment

Wisconsin's recruitment and selection innovations have received national recognition.

Opportunities Bulletin. Published three times per month, it lists all job vacancies currently open to the public. Copies of the bulletin are distributed throughout the State to libraries, college placement offices, and community-based organizations.

Wisconsin also has addressed the frustrations applicants feel over the civil service testing process. For a wide range of clerical and service jobs, which require that candidates pass written tests, the State has replaced a system requiring advance

registration with one allowing jobseekers to take tests on a walk-in basis. For professional jobs, Wisconsin has set up its Entry Professional Program. Instead of requiring candidates with two-year or four-year college degrees to appear for written tests, this program allows candidates to mail in a short application form and questionnaire specifically tailored to the jobs they are seeking. By evaluating these application forms, tailored questionnaires, and college course work, the State can quickly and inexpensively assess applicants.

And to help managers immediately offer jobs to highly qualified candidates in hard-to-fill jobs, Wisconsin operates a Critical Recruitment Program. This program emphasizes quick, job-related assessment techniques such as resume reviews and allows for waiver of some assessment and selection rules. The requests of agency managers for permission to use this program are acted on within 24 hours by the State's Merit Recruitment and Selection Division.

Wisconsin's recruitment and selection innovations have received national recognition. Among their many awards are the International Personnel Management Association's Agency Award for Excellence and the Ford Foundation's Innovations in American Government Award.

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